

Observation and diaries

Observation

Observation can be a really useful tool for establishing what skills, behaviour and interactions are like at different stages of a project. It is a subjective measure of intended outcomes (i.e. It is based on one person's or group of people's, perceptions), but taken alongside other methods can be a really useful indicator of change.

Observation can be carried out by a project manager, a music practitioner, a parent/carer, or a young person/participant. It is often useful to have an idea of what should be observed, and to use the same observer at each stage. For example, if you know you are looking for changes in musical ability, you can prepare the person doing the observation to look out for participants picking up certain new musical skills, or their ability to play a piece of music at different times (e.g. At the beginning, middle and end of a project). If you are interested in changes in behaviour, you can ask the observer to look at how people are getting on with each other, whether they are paying attention, or whether they are being helpful in sessions.

Observers can use a diary or topic guide with a set of specific questions (or things to look out for) in it, or they can simply take notes on a blank piece of paper. If it's not appropriate to take notes during a session, the observer can write them up immediately after a session in a reflective diary.

Diaries

Diaries can be a really useful reflective tool at key stages of, or throughout, a project. Diaries can be kept by participants, music practitioners, project managers, or anyone else attached to a project. Diaries are particularly well suited to recording change since people are asked to consider their thoughts about their skills (or other people's skills), attitudes, feelings and so forth at different stages in time.

A very simple approach to using diaries in evaluation is to set three key questions to be answered at the end of each session (or monthly – whatever is appropriate). Diaries can be written or recorded (audio or video – or song?). Diaries can even be built-in as part of a reflective section at the end of a session – meaning the findings can be directly built in to the project's delivery the following week and so forth.

Diaries and observation sheets can also include quantitative scales if that is a useful way of tracking change (nb – these are indicators that, taken together, will indicate change in an intended outcome, so it's great to have both quantitative and qualitative evidence from a range of sources).



Box 1. Method example from Making Sounds – Observation and Diaries

Diaries to be completed by music leaders at the end of each session:

Q1. What did you think of the musical ability of the group at today's session?

I thought Mark and Susie had come on a lot, they were both willing to try the guitar for the first time and were keen to think about how they could start mixing up the composition a bit more by bringing in other instruments. Jen and Gary were more reluctant to try the guitar but spent most of the session working on the keyboard and clearly wanted to master the hook they'd been working on. Overall there was clear progression, but i'll keep an eye on mixing up the instruments as this seems to move people along the quickest in terms of picking one over the other and getting to grips with it.

Q2. How would you rate the musical ability of the group today overall?

5 4 3 2 1

Q3. What did you think of the behaviour of the group at today's session?

No problems with behaviour today at all. Jen was a little reluctant to join in at the beginning but warmed up after a couple of ice breakers. They seem to be gelling as a group now, which is a big relief.

Q4. How would you rate the behaviour of the group today overall?

5 4 3 2 1

Box 2. Reporting example from Making Sounds – Observation and Diaries

In order to identify changes in musical ability and behaviour we asked music leaders to keep a diary of their observations at the end of each session. This focused on four questions: a description and rating of the musical skills of the participants, and a description and rating of the behaviour of the participants. Over 20 sessions the music leader rating of participants' musical ability went from a mean score of 2.5 to 4.5 (based on 5 music leader diaries). Music leaders also noted an improvement in participant behaviour, with the overall score going from 2.2 in the first session to 4.8 in the final session. These quantitative findings are supported by the reflections of the music leaders in the diaries:

ML1 : I saw a real improvement in Jen's keyboard playing today, she had clearly been practicing at home because she could hardly play the three chords together at the end of last week's session and she started off today's session playing the hook brilliantly to get us all started!